



Tips for Helping Riders Who Have Cognitive Disabilities

“Disabled” doesn’t only mean loss of mobility. The American Disabilities Act (ADA) defines individuals with disabilities as those with “...a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of such individual; a record of such an impairment; or being regarded as having such an impairment” (CFR 49 Subtitle A, et al). Cognitive disabilities are covered under the ADA.

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by Gerri Doyle
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Imagine being in another country where the language is different than your own. You are in the train station and need to catch the train. Schedules and maps are available, but they are printed in a language you can’t read. You ask people for help, but they don’t understand what you are trying to say, they treat you like a lost child, they point with annoyance at that map you can’t interpret, and... Well, you get the idea. When it comes to transportation, the ability to use it requires a certain level of communication that most of us take for granted.

Most people can read a map to orient themselves. But many people with cognitive disabilities can’t. They may find standard transit maps with their small print and thin intersecting lines confusing or unreadable. Or they may encounter transit personnel who can’t clearly explain system information or who speak to them in a condescending manner. Understanding the needs of individuals with cognitive disabilities can help transit agencies provide better and more respectful service.

How to recognize cognitive disabilities

Individuals with cognitive disabilities have difficulty with basic skills such as thinking, awareness, orientation, processing information, and communication. Several conditions and diseases may cause a cognitive dysfunction, including Alzheimer’s or a traumatic head injury. The use of clear, simple language by your staff could go a long way toward making your services more accessible.

Keep it simple

The Arc of the United States, described on their web site as “the nation’s leading organization on mental retardation,” has prepared a training program for fixed route bus operators designed to enhance communication with individuals having cognitive disabilities. These methods are simple and can be translated to other types of transit systems with only minor adjustments. They recommend a three-step, “people first” process to enhance communication:

• Step 1—Be an active listener.

Notice if the individual is having difficulty expressing thoughts, responding to questions, or is repeating a question over and over.

• Step 2—Adjust the communication process.

This may mean using simpler words, adding gestures while speaking, showing how to perform a task, writing information, drawing a simple picture, repeating the information more than once, or simply speaking slowly and clearly.

• Step 3—Check for comprehension.

Asking “Do you understand?” is not the best way to check for comprehension. It’s better to ask specific questions about what he or she wants to do, beginning your questions with “who,” “what,” and “where.”

These steps, coupled with respect and treating an adult as an adult, can make a transit system easier to use for individuals with cognitive disabilities. Any project designed to make a system more accessible to the disabled will benefit from clear communication between passengers and providers. Working together, solutions can be found to make transit systems more accessible to riders with a variety of needs.

Sources

1. “Improving Bus Accessibility Systems for Persons with Sensory and Cognitive Impairments,” FTA/DOT, 1993.
2. “Serving Passengers with Cognitive Disabilities,” Project ACTION, 1995.

Project ACTION publications may be ordered by phone at 800/659-NIAT. There may be a fee for postage and handling. ▲